# Beyond Clickbait:
# 10 Rules For Effective Headline Writing

A SCIENTIFIC GUIDE TO THE ART OF ENGAGING READERS

## Watch Your Language

Many digital media creators still practice the art of headline writing by crossing their fingers when they press publish. Small wonder that nearly half of all headlines do not prove to be as effective as hoped for: according to Chartbeat's data, 45% of visitors who land on an article spend less than 15 seconds on the page.

And yet, there is a better path—a scientific solution that complements the art and eliminates the guesswork.

At Chartbeat, we're committed to helping publishers grow engagement from their loyal readers, which has a great deal to do with writing more successful homepage headlines—i.e., headlines that lead readers to engage longer with an article. So, we parsed the data from many of the world's largest publishers—all of whom use Headline Testing to pinpoint more effective headlines—to get a definitive picture of what gets people to spend quality time reading and what doesn't. After assessing 250,000 headlines used in 100,000 tests, we found that language choices really do matter—certain words, phrasing and references help, some have no effect, and others actually hurt engagement.

But which words, phrases and references lead to which outcomes is often surprising and sometimes counterintuitive. With that in mind, we've used the major learnings from our deep dive into the data to debunk the myths about what makes a headline work. A headline writer's time is precious—SEO, platform character counters, shareability, searchability, clickbait philosophy, and deadlines compete with puns and structure for headspace. This quick yet scientific guide to one of the oldest arts should help every publisher up their engagement game.
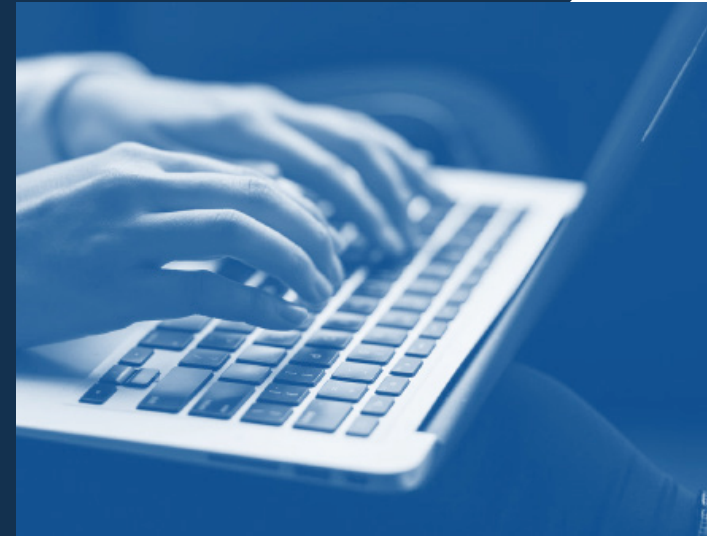
## Correct Grammar

1 | **MYTH**

Avoid demonstrative pronouns

**REALITY**

**Words like "these" and "this" increase the likelihood that people not only click on a piece but actually engage with the article.**

In print, where space is at a premium, omitting these words as a form of "headline-ese" made sense, but in the era of robot reporters such words make headlines sound more human— which is a connection readers respond to.

2 | **MYTH**

Omit determinants

**REALITY**

**See immediately above for why it's a best practice to add words like "the" and "an" on your homepage.**

It should read more conversationally than a print-edition front page.

An Opposition to the Millennial Cr

**3** | **MYTH**

Adjectives are often a waste of space

**REALITY**

**Again, human speech elements are generally effective, so adjectives–especially superlatives–definitely have their place in digital headline writing.**

That said, our data analysis found that negative superlatives significantly outperform positive ones—words like "the worst" ranked as the second most impactful helpful element, while ones like "the strongest" offered only a marginal boost. For this difference we can thank "negativity bias," which is profound enough to be detected at the earliest stage of the brain's information processing.

**NEGATIVITY BIAS (n.):**

The phenomenon of giving more psychological weight to bad experiences than good ones.

## Strong Structures

**4**   **MYTH**

Headlines should be really long

**REALITY**

### Notably long headlines on homepages don't have any effect on engagement

(though they can be valuable for SEO strategies). On the other hand, overly short headlines actually hurt it. Unlike in a print edition, where there is often a subhead and photo to give additional context, a too-brief homepage headline fails to give the reader enough information to opt in.

**5**   **MYTH**

Questions should NEVER be used in a headline

**REALITY**

### We found that interrogative words such as "when" and "where" are very helpful in getting people to engage, but question marks themselves are a turn off.

Why? Compare "Where should you go to eat?" vs. "Where you should go to eat."—both use an interrogative, but the first version feels more vague. That clarity is also why some sites find a Q&A format very successful: "Should Mariano Rivera be in the Hall of Fame? Experts say yes." Readers realize they'll get analysis in addition to answers.
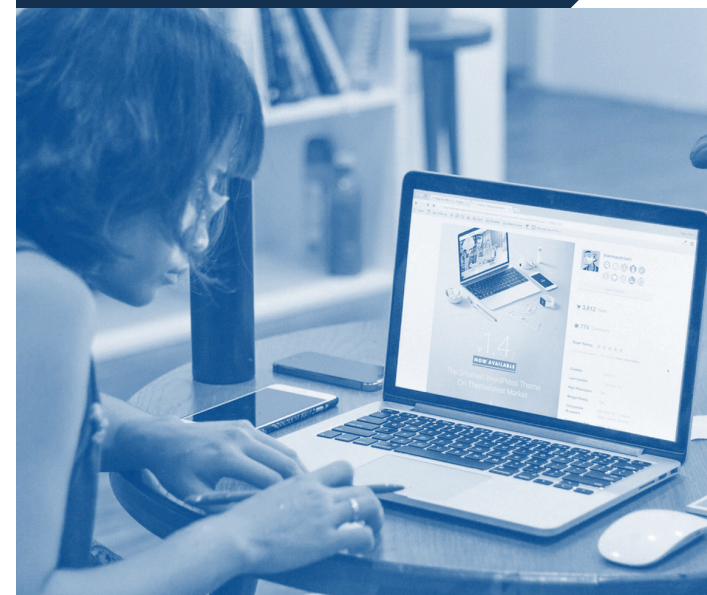
**6**  |  **MYTH**

Numbers are cheap

**REALITY**

## More than just a siren song for click-and-leave readers, numbers increase engagement.

That's true for "8 Rules For Effective Headline Writing"—specificity equals value and certainty to humans—but also for headlines that imply depth of detail. Readers are less likely to read as story about an athlete when the headline mentions her "multi-million dollar contract" than when they see it's worth $42.5 million.

**7**  |  **MYTH**

Quotes don't belong in headlines

**REALITY**

## Once again, with emphasis: readers connect to human voices, and nothing says a human is talking more than a quote.

This reality pretty much explains why quotations not only boost engagement with headlines, but stories as well.

## Good References

### 8

**MYTH**

Use famous figures and proper nouns whenever possible

**REALITY**

**In aggregate, boldface names (Cardi B, Roger Goodell) and proper nouns (Washington Monument, the Everglades) did not increase or decrease engagement.**

However, we have found that some names tend to draw more readers than others, so experimentation is always encouraged. One tech site found that Tim Cook didn't do much but Elon Musk's full name always grabbed attention.

### 9

**MYTH**

Anchor in time

**REALITY**

**This is a legacy behavior.**

Specificity about hour, date, day, or week works well in print, but it makes no sense in a digital world where tomorrow and Saturday don't mean anything to a reader who discovers a story after it is published. Think of this as a friendly reminder to update headlines for the platform where audiences will find it.

## Second Chances

These myths and realities should more than anything serve as a starting point for your own experimentation, the better to see how they impact the behavior of your audience. Which brings us to our final misconception:

**10** | **MYTH**

Trust your gut

**REALITY**

### When publishers use Chartbeat's headline testing tool, alternative headlines outperform the original versions 62% of the time.

Even better, they produce a 71% increase in quality clicks, i.e. a reader spending 15 seconds of engaged time consuming the story to which he or she clicked through. This is in part because the "original" headlines often stuck to more conventional parameters, where alternative headlines moved away from those parameters to try new tacks. In the end, experimentation allows publishers to identify nuances in what resonates with their unique audience.

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## If Nothing Else Read This

A useful chart to print out and pin up.

### TRAITS OF SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL HEADLINES

| Help | No Effect | Hurt |
|---|---|---|
| **Demonstrative pronouns** "these", "this" | Names | Notably short headlines |
| **Negative superlatives** "worst" | Proper nouns | Question marks |
| **Interrogatives** "what", "when" | Notably long headlines | **Time references** "tomorrow", "Saturday" |
| **Determinants** "the", "an" | | |
| Numbers | | |
| Adjectives | | |
| Quotations | | |
| **Positive superlatives** "best" | | |

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## Who We Are

Chartbeat, the content intelligence platform for publishers, empowers media companies to build loyal audiences with real-time and historical editorial analytics across desktop, social, and mobile platforms. Chartbeat helps digital publishing organizations understand what, within their content, is keeping people engaged. Partnering with over 60,000 media brands across 60+ countries, Chartbeat's **real-time and historical dashboards**, in-depth headline testing and in-page **optimization tools**, **robust reporting**, and **more** help the world's leading media organizations understand, measure, and build business value from the attention earned by their written and video content.

## Interested in learning more?

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